

Week Nine

Separating fact from fiction in my quest for fitness

Joe Ferry

I think it's safe to say that regular exercise and proper nutrition have become a way of life for me.

Working out is not just a means to an end; it's a valuable activity on its own merits. It feels good. And I'm making food choices based on solid principles of nutrition, not on the whims of cravings induced by wild fluctuations in blood sugar caused by eating too many carbs.

Fernando Paredes, the personal trainer I selected to guide me through this journey, says most people lose interest in their well-intentioned fitness programs after between six and eight weeks. Now that I've completed nine weeks and am looking forward to more, I feel like I've overcome a huge hurdle. It doesn't hurt that I feel the best I have in years.

Friday's session with Grace, one of Fernando's trainers, was incredible. I went in to the studio on natural high and kept it, no matter how hard she pushed me.

Anyway, now that I have a good handle on the basic proper functional exercise and nutrition principles, I have a lot more questions for Fernando. The more we talk, the more I am coming to realize the depth and breadth of what constitutes a successful fitness regimen.

I've also come to see the scope of Fernando's knowledge about the subject. He has an uncanny ability to break down the complexities of the human body, explaining the intricate and subtle ways different systems interact. More importantly, he explains how and why it works the way it does by pointing out complex genetic adaptations from a historical and anthropological perspective, and puts them all into terms even I can understand.

Let me tell you, this guy is more than just a personal trainer. I don't even know what to label him: Trainer? Nutritionist? Physiologist? Therapist? Athletic Trainer? Motivational Coach? Professor? Researcher? They all seem to fit but none of them alone seems to do him justice. Plus, he's a nice guy.

In this era of over-hyped, pseudo "experts" giving you all sizzle and no steak, it's refreshing when you find a real expert in their field.

Which brings up a good point: I wish all of my faithful readers that have been following my progress could be here with me learning his concepts. But since we all can't fit into his office, I've decided to spend the last few weeks of this series passing on Fernando's philosophy so you can get a feel for what I'm learning straight from the horse's mouth.

I'm going to pick his brain about everything: food, exercise, cardio, recovery, supplements, injuries, fat loss, muscle building, sports training - and how to do it all successfully.

Here's Part I:

Q. Ever since I walked into your office that first day back in March, you've constantly referred to Functional Nutrition. What is it and why is it important?

A. First of all, let me make it clear that the subject of nutrition is a very complex area that generates much debate. What I will be basing my answers on are on the present known facts. We won't be able to answer everything, but hopefully we'll shed a good amount of light on this area.

Functional Nutrition is a term I use that entails looking at the body's nutritional requirements. Before we can say what we should be eating and in what amounts, we have to understand what the body needs to function, which requires a little bit of a history and anthropology lesson.

For thousands of years we were an agrarian society, leaving off the



My Middle-Aged Journey To Physical Fitness

land. Sometimes food was abundant, sometimes there was very little to eat. Literally, it was a feast or famine. We never knew where the next meal would come from. For the body to survive the frequent famines, it had to conserve energy by slowing down the rate at which we burned calories.

That's why it's never a good idea to skip meals, even today. Our bodies still have that "sixth sense" when it comes to famine and will automatically slow down our metabolism in an effort to conserve energy.

Typically, up until about 150 years ago, humans ate mostly raw, whole foods: meat, eggs, plants, vegetables, nut and seeds, fruits, grains and water. Everything was extremely high in nutrients, enzymes, fiber and friendly bacteria. Today's processed foods have very little of those things.

Q. Very interesting history lesson, but how does that translate into the way we should eat today?

A. First, we have to understand the way our bodies process food. No one talks about digestive physiology but it's a big component in the big puzzle.

Picture this: for thousands of years, we would eat unprocessed, whole foods. Our digestive system got used to working with foods extremely high in nutrients, enzymes, fiber and friendly bacteria.

When they entered the digestive system, the body had lots of helping in breaking them down because of the natural enzymes and friendly bacteria.

Then, this high-nutrient food went to the small intestine for extraction and absorption of all those great nutrients.

Then, it was off to the large intestine and the colon, where the last bits of nutrients and water were extracted, with the remaining high-fiber acting like a broom to sweep everything else out.

Guess what? In 2007, the human digestive system is not that much different. Unfortunately, the food we are eating is much different: low in nutrients, fiber, enzyme and friendly bacteria, leaving our digestive system confused and not able to function the way it originally learned how. Hence, the proliferation of problems ranging from chronic indigestion, acid reflux, Irritable Bowel Syndrome to colon cancer.

Q. But with everybody so busy these days, who has time to shop for and prepare only whole foods? How can someone overcome these deficiencies in their diet?

A. Exactly! The fact is that no one eats a perfect diet. I know I don't!

Obviously, the best way is to eat more whole foods. But, since that is not a realistic lifestyle exchange for most people, it becomes imperative to plug in the nutritional gaps created by our modern diet and take a good multi-vitamin and mineral complex daily, take fiber daily, and, depending on the needs of the individual, taking digestive enzymes and probiotics.

Q. Sounds like you are a big believer in supplements?

A. Absolutely, yes! To fill those nutritional gaps that our modern

diet creates, supplements are imperative.

Q. Before I came to you, I heard all sorts of conflicting information about the right way to eat. Some people advocate a high protein. Some say carbs are good, others say they are bad. Almost everyone says to avoid fat. What is the best combination for someone who wants to eat a healthy, balanced diet?

A. For the vast majority of people, all the evidence points to a high protein-moderate fat-low starch diet as being the best. For a few people, a high fat-moderate protein-low starch diet is best.

The common denominator is low starch. You see, the body views starch and fat as energy sources. And they both work on a sliding scale. If you eat a high carb meal, it should be low in fat. If you eat a high fat meal it should be low in carbs. If not, the body gets physiologically confused and a host of bad things happen...high cholesterol, triglycerides, diabetes, etc.

That's the real problem. It's not just fat, but rather the combination of high-fat and high-carb that people consume.

Want more proof? Dr. Frank Hu, Associate Professor of Nutrition and Epidemiology at the Harvard School of Public Health, commented on a "low-carb diet" study in the March 2007 Journal of the American Medical Association, in which he stated: "This study confirms the importance of reducing carbohydrate in the diet. There has been too much emphasis on saturated fat. Bagels, white bread, potatoes and soft drinks are the real bad guys in our diet."

Now, before a lot of feathers get ruffled, especially those of my vegan and lacto-ovo-vegan friends, let me explain further...the evidence suggests that 75-85 percent of people will respond best to high protein-moderate fat-low starch. A definite majority.

However, if a person has no taste for meat or any kind of protein and they crave more veggies and carbs, that's fine. They probably fall under the other 15 percent to 25 percent of people.

Q. Ok, then how should our daily food intake be structured?

A. There's an old concept I like to use: eat like a King in the morning, like a prince at lunch and like a pauper at dinner. Your largest meal of the day should be breakfast. Why? In the morning, after eight hours of sleep and reconstruction from the previous day's activities, your body is looking for nutrients to get its metabolism kick started.

Breakfast is the kick-start, with three or four more moderate-sized meals throughout the day to keep it going. Imagine your metabolism as a bonfire. You want to get that fire going quickly and to increase its intensity of the flames as the day goes on.

Look at it this way: is it better to put two big logs on the fire at the same time? Or is it better to break them into small pieces and feed the fire several times during the day?

Two big logs at the same time may put out the fire, while the moderate-sized ones will keep it going for a longer time.

I have saying: "Eat for what you are about to do, not for what you just did." Have a big breakfast to prepare you for the activities of the day. In the evening, eat a small meal for dinner because you are less active and preparing for sleep.

Q. When I first came to you, a lot of the nutritional information you shared was new to me. It makes sense, but is there good science behind it? Do you have evidence to prove that what you are saying is the correct approach?

A. Joe, there is so much scientific

and empirical evidence to support what I'm saying that it's a wonder to me why more people aren't aware of it all. I wish I could take the time to go over all the evidence with you, but I will leave you with this: the number-one piece of evidence is in our DNA, our genetics.

Talk to any geneticist and you will find it takes between 8,000 and 30,000 years for the human body to adapt genetically to a new environment. That's a big range. Now, for thousands of years, humans ate one way. And we've only been eating our current for about 150 years. Do the math. Is 150 years enough time for a genetic change to occur?

Obviously not. We still are governed by the Feast or Famine response because we are no different genetically from the humans who lived 5,000 years ago. And since we are not eating the way our bodies originally learned to eat, is it any wonder why we have all these problems?

The fact is, for maximum health and fitness, we need to go back to our "roots" of consuming a high-protein, moderate-fat, low-starch diet consisting of mostly whole foods. Let me refer to a quote from someone who has forgotten more than I'll ever know on this particu-

lar subject.

Here's what past president of the American College of Cardiology, Dr. Sylvan Lee Weinberg, had to say on this very important topic in a 2004 article in the Journal of the American College of Cardiology: "The low-fat 'diet heart hypothesis' has been controversial for nearly 100 years. The low-fat, high-carbohydrate diet, promulgated vigorously by the National Cholesterol Education Program, National Institutes of Health, and American Heart Association since the Lipid Research Clinics-Primary Prevention Program in 1984, and earlier by the U.S. Department of Agriculture food pyramid, may well have played an unintended role in the current epidemics of obesity, lipid abnormalities, type II diabetes and metabolic syndromes. This diet can no longer be defended by appeal to the authority of prestigious medical organizations or by rejecting clinical experience and a growing medical literature suggesting that the much-maligned low-carbohydrate, high-protein diet may have a salutary effect on the epidemics in question."

That pretty much says it all, Joe.

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-- Susan Sandor

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A GOURMET'S PANTRY

